

Understanding the Promethean Archetype

Frankenstein Unit / European literature / Mr. Wright

PART ONE: Read the story of Prometheus and the definition of the promethean archetype

PART TWO: Complete notes in response to the questions on the other side of this handout.

Prometheus (mythology), in Greek mythology, one of the Titans, known as the friend and benefactor of humanity, the son of the Titan Iapetus by the sea nymph Clymene or the Titaness Themis. Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were given the task of creating humanity and providing humans and all the animals on earth with the endowments they would need to survive. Epimetheus (whose name means afterthought) accordingly proceeded to bestow on the various animals gifts of courage, strength, swiftness, and feathers, fur, and other protective coverings. When it came time to create a being who was to be superior to all other living creatures, Epimetheus found he had been so reckless with his resources that he had nothing left to bestow. He was forced to ask his brother's help, and Prometheus (whose name means forethought) took over the task of creation. To make humans superior to the animals, he fashioned them in nobler form and enabled them to walk upright. He then went up to heaven and lit a torch with fire from the sun. The gift of fire that Prometheus bestowed upon

humanity was more valuable than any of the gifts the animals had received.

Because of his actions Prometheus incurred the wrath of the god Zeus. Not only did he steal the fire he gave to humans, but he also tricked the gods so that they should get the worst parts of any animal sacrificed to them, and human beings the best. In one pile, Prometheus arranged the edible parts of an ox in a hide and disguised them with a covering of entrails. In the other, he placed the bones, which he covered with fat. Zeus, asked to choose between the two, took the fat and was very angry when he discovered that it covered a pile of bones. Thereafter, only fat and bones were sacrificed to the gods; the good meat was kept for mortals. For Prometheus's transgressions, Zeus had him chained to a rock in the Caucasus, where he was constantly preyed upon by an eagle. Finally he was freed by the hero Hercules, who slew the eagle.

Promethean - of, relating to, or resembling Prometheus, his experiences, or his art;

Especially :daringly original or creative. Function: *adjective* Date: 1594

Prometheus as an Archetype and Symbol

Prometheus has become a famous archetype and symbol in world literature, music, and art for his defiance of established authority and for the suffering he endured. Through the ages, writers and composers have referred or alluded to the Titan to draw attention to a fictional or real person's suffering or his rebellion against a government, a way of life, a tradition, or an accepted practice or principle. Examples of such references are the titles of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*; or, the Modern Prometheus; Percy Bysshe

Shelley's long 1820 poem, *Prometheus Unbound*; French symbolist painter Gustave Moreau's 1868 work, *Prometheus*; In 1969, Milovan Djilas, a Yugoslav political writer who criticized communism, wrote in *The Unperfect Society*, "Though man may endure his ordeal like Sisyphus, the time must come for him to revolt like Prometheus before his powers are exhausted by the ordeal." Writers use the adjective *Promethean* often in their works to suggest qualities associated with Prometheus.

PART TWO: Discuss and record notes in response to the following questions.

1. What is the difference between human's **theft of fire** and **possession of fire**?

2. What comment or criticism put forth by this story sparks a desire in humans for this story to be true?
(What truth about the human experience is put forth by this story and how might this story be cathartic for some readers?)

3. Respond to one of the quotations below:
 - Science has made us gods even before we are worthy of being men. --Jean Rostand
 - Science has ... bestowed upon [man] powers which may be called almost creative; which have enabled him to change and modify the beings surrounding him, and by his experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments ... who would not be ambitious of becoming acquainted with the most profound secrets of nature; of ascertaining her hidden operations; and of exhibiting to man that system of knowledge which relates so intimately to their own physical and moral constitution? -- Humphrey Davy
 - Most people say that it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong: it is character.
--Albert Einstein